6

Tearmoon Empire

MANGA: Mizu Morino ✦ ORIGINAL WORK: Nozomu Mochitsuki ✦ CHARACTER DESIGNS: Gilse

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Tearmoon Empire

IT WAS WIDELY KNOWN THAT PRINCESS MIA LUNA TEARMOON OF THE TEARMOON EMPIRE HAD TWO ARCHENEMIES.

SION SOL SUNKLAND...

...AND TIONA RUDOLVON.

HOWEVER, THE INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBLE FOR CARRY-ING OUT HER EXECUTION ON BEHALF OF THE REVOLUTIONARY ARMY...

...WAS NEITHER OF THOSE TWO.

Chapter 24

EXPLAIN YOURSELF! WHY HAVEN'T YOU GONE ON THE ATTACK?!

ARE YOU SOLDIERS OR SLOTHS?!

YOU!

AS I'VE SAID BEFORE, MY LORD...

...OUR MISSION IS SIMPLY TO KEEP THE PEACE.

CENTURION OF THE IMPERIAL ARMY

DION ALAIA

I BELIEVE THERE IS NO NEED TO EN-GAGE IN ANY UNNECESSARY HOSTILITIES.

SMILE
SMILE
SMILE
SMILE
SMILE
SMILE
SMILE
SMILE
...IS WHAT I WOULD SAY, IF I WERE LESS PRUDENT ABOUT THESE THINGS.
THEN AGAIN, WHO KNOWS HOW LONG MY REASON WILL HOLD IF HE KEEPS THIS UP?
YOU ASKED ME THE EXACT SAME THING JUST THE OTHER DAY! ARE YOU GOING SENILE?
TWITCH
WHY YOU MISER-ABLE...
WHAT DO YOU THINK I'M PAYING YOU FOR?!
ISN'T RISKING YOUR LIFE FOR YOUR LORD A SOLDIER'S DUTY?
THAT FOREST IS LULU TERRITORY.
IF WE BATTLE THERE, WE'RE SURE TO SUFFER SIGNIFICANT CASUALTIES.
...
WINCE...
PERHAPS YOU'VE FORGOTTEN YOUR PLACE, MY LORD?
HEH
WE ARE HIS MAJESTY'S SOLDIERS, NOT YOURS.

PAH! ENOUGH OF THIS!

YOU ARE DISMISSED.

BEGONE!

WAVE

WAVE

THE EBONY MOON MINISTRY, WHICH HIS MAJESTY HAS GRANTED AUTHORITY OVER MILITARY AFFAIRS, ORDERED US HERE TO KEEP THE PEACE.

RECKLESSLY ENGAGING IN BATTLE WOULD RUN COUNTER TO HIS MAJESTY'S—

SIGH

I SWEAR...

GUESS YOU'RE DONE, HUH?

VICE-CAPTAIN VANOS

BLOODY NOBLES. THEY JUST TELL YOU TO GO AND KILL EACH OTHER LIKE IT'S ALL FUN AND GAMES.

OH!

CAPTAIN!

YOU KNOW WHO'D SURVIVE? YOU, ME, AND NO ONE ELSE.

SO? HOW'D IT GO?

THE SAME AS EVER.

UGH

I TOLD HIM IT'S TOO DAN-GEROUS TO FIGHT IN THAT FOREST.

DAMN RIGHT WE WOULD!

IT'D BE A BAD LOOK IF THE CAPTAIN AND THE VICE-CAPTAIN WERE THE ONLY SURVIVORS!

HA!

GA

HA!

HA

ANYWAY, CONSIDERING OUR GOOD LORD PAID THE CAPITAL A PERSONAL VISIT, I WAS EXPECT-ING HIM TO COME BACK WITH A DIRECT ORDER FROM HIS MAJESTY.

LOOKS LIKE MY CONCERN WAS UNWARRANTED, THOUGH. IT MUST NOT HAVE GONE WELL.

Oh?

I DUNNO ABOUT THAT.

THINK IT'S A LITTLE EARLY FOR YOU TO FEEL RELIEVED, CAPTAIN.

WHY'S THAT?

CLANK

SURE IS.

RUMOR HAS IT HER HIGHNESS IS ON HER WAY TO PERSONALLY INSPECT THE PLACE.

THE IMPERIAL GUARD...?

BE-SIDES...

...

SORRY, BUT I'VE BEEN THROUGH TOO MUCH TO GET WORKED UP OVER PRINCESSES AND PRINCES, OR WHATEVER.

BETTER NOT LET HER CATCH YOU FROWNING LIKE THAT! SHE CAME ALL THE WAY OUT HERE TO SEE US, AFTER ALL.

WELL, ISN'T THAT JUST MARVELOUS...

I'LL BET THE VISCOUNT BROUGHT HER BACK WITH HIM.

RIGHT.

THE TIMING'S TOO BLOODY PERFECT.

THOUGHT SO.

THIS SMELLS FISHY TO YOU TOO, DOESN'T IT?

WSH

PRINCESS MIA, HUH?

WE'LL JUST HAVE TO SEE WHAT NONSENSE BERMAN'S FILLED HER EARS WITH.

THEN AGAIN, SHE MAY LOOK LIKE A SWEET LITTLE GIRL, BUT DON'T THEY SAY SHE'S SOME SORT OF SAGE?

I DID.

WISHFUL THINKING USUALLY ENDS IN DISAP-POINTMENT.

THEN AGAIN, IT'S ALSO HOW I LEARNED TO SWING A SWORD, SO I GUESS THERE'S SOMETHING TO BE SAID FOR IT.

キッ 3 GLANCE

キッ 3 GLANCE

HERE'S A SAYING FOR YOU: NOTHING IN LIFE EVER WORKS OUT THE WAY YOU HOPE IT WILL.

NOW THAT'S SOME CHOICE PESSI-MISM!

WHAT PHILOSO-PHER SAID THAT?

SIGH

HA HA

SO YOU WERE DISAPPOINTED SO MANY TIMES, YOU DECIDED TO GET GOOD ENOUGH YOU TO HANDLE ANYTHING LIFE THROWS AT YOU?

IN A WORD, YES.

HM?

ギャーン
AGH
E—
EEEEEEEEEK!
?!

SWOON

THWUMP

SO...

Your Highness!

Stay with us!

...HOW'RE YOU GONNA HANDLE THIS ONE?

DON'T ASK ME.

DION ALAIA

HE WAS THE IMPERIAL ARMY'S MOST CAPABLE SWORDSMAN.

THOUGH HE BEGAN HIS CAREER AS A MERCENARY, HIS SKILL SOON WON HIM A POSITION AS AN OFFICER.

HOWEVER...

...IN THE PREVIOUS TIMELINE, HE WAS ORDERED TO FIGHT IN THE BATTLE OF SEALENCE FOREST— A CONFLICT BROUGHT ABOUT BY MIA'S SELFISH DESIRE FOR JEWEL BOXES.

GRAAAH

THAT BATTLE CLAIMED THE LIVES OF ALL HIS MEN.

FSS
SSSHHH

WHEN THE REVOLUTIONARY ARMY ROSE UP SOME TIME LATER, DION JOINED ITS RANKS WITHOUT HESITATION.

MANY PROMINENT IMPERIAL OFFICERS FELL BY HIS BLADE, AND HIS CONTRI-BUTIONS HELPED SEAL THE IMPERIAL ARMY'S DEFEAT.

IN RETURN FOR HIS SERVICE, HE ASKED FOR JUST ONE REWARD.

THE RIGHT TO BEHEAD PRINCESS MIA.

SHOVE

BE A GOOD PRINCESS...

...AND DIE.

...!

JOLT

WHERE AM I...?

WH—

I'M CERTAIN IT WAS ALL JUST A TERRIBLY VIVID HALLUCINATION...

MY MIND MUST BE PLAYING TRICKS ON ME. FATIGUE FROM THE CARRIAGE RIDE, SURELY.

I HAVE THE STRANGEST FEELING I JUST HAD A TRULY HORRIFYING ENCOUNTER!

WELL, GOOD MORNING!

FEELING BETTER NOW, YOUR HIGHNESS?

WILT

THAT'S THE VERY MAN WHO LOPPED OFF MY HEAD!

WH-WH-WHAT?!

WHY?!

DION ALAIA!!!

HOW IN THE MOONS IS **HE** HERE?!

AN HONOR TO MEET YOU, YOUR HIGHNESS.

DION ALAIA, AT YOUR SERVICE.

I'M THE COMMANDER OF THE SOLDIERS DISPATCHED HERE.

I-I CAN PRACTICALLY FEEL THE BLADE'S ICY BITE ALREADY!

SHUDDER

THWAP

?

IS SOMETHING THE MATTER...

...YOUR HIGHNESS?

EEE-

YOU OKAY, PRINCESS?

SHUDDER SHUDDER

GUESS THE CART RIDE REALLY DID A NUMBER ON YOU, EH?

TREMBLE TREMBLE

HYEEK!

WHOA, WATCH OUT!

HE'S A BEAR OF A MAN, AND I WAS STARTLED.

I-IT'S—

IT'S JUST YOUR VICE CAPTAIN!

IS THERE SOMETHING ON MY FACE?

N-N—

NO, NOTHING OF THE SORT!

CAN'T ARGUE WITH THAT! GUESS A FACE LIKE MINE ***WOULD*** SCARE A LITTLE LADY LIKE YOU!

GA HA HA!

Y-Yes, of course...

C'mon, up and at 'em!

I'M THE ONE SHE'S BEEN SCARED OF THIS WHOLE TIME.

SHE'S LYING.

ME, THOUGH? NOT SO MUCH.

I HATE TO ADMIT IT, BUT IF I HAD TO KILL A KID, I WOULDN'T HESITATE.

IF THERE'S ANYONE HERE SHE SHOULD BE AFRAID OF, IT'S ME...

NOT THAT I'D FAULT HER JUDGMENT FOR THAT.

VANOS HAS THE FACE OF A BANDIT, BUT HE'S A BIG OLD SOFTIE WHEN IT COMES TO KIDS.

IT'D TAKE SOMETHING TRULY ATROCIOUS TO CONVINCE HIM TO HARM HER.

IF SOMEONE COMES AT ME WITH A WEAPON, I'LL SHOW THEM NO MERCY.

SMILE

IT'D BE ONE THING FOR A FIGHTER TO TELL HOW DANGEROUS I AM ON THE BATTLEFIELD, BUT THIS IS DIFFERENT.

...BUT HOW'D A PAMPERED PRINCESS LIKE HER FIGURE THAT OUT?

BLINK

JUMP

SHIVER SHIVER SHIVER SHIVER SHIVER SHIVER SHIVER SHIVER SHIVER

COLD-BLOODED BATTLE FIEND!

OH NO OH NO OH NO

MIA, OF COURSE, KNEW HOW SCARY DION WAS FROM EXPERIENCE.

GUILLOTINER!

MURDERER!

AH!

UM!

YES, OF COURSE. WHAT IS IT, LUDWIG?

YOUR HIGHNESS!

YOUR HIGH-NESS...

CAN YOU SPARE A MOMENT?

FORGIVE MY IMPERTINENCE FOR SUGGEST-ING THIS WHILE YOU'RE STILL TIRED...

...BUT I BELIEVE YOU SHOULD INSPECT THE FOREST, ACCOMPANIED BY CAPTAIN DION.

BWUH?

DEEP IN DENIAL

REALLY, NOW!

THAT WAS FAR FROM YOUR BEST JOKE, YOU STUPID FOUR-EYES!

O-

OHO HO HO!

GLANCE

WAIT—

BUT—

MERCIFUL MOONS, HE *MEANT* IT?!

THERE'S A RISK THAT THE VISCOUNT WILL INTERFERE WITH YOUR PLANS IF WE GO DIRECTLY TO HIS MANOR.

A PERSONAL, CLANDESTINE ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION SHOULD PROVE FAR MORE EFFECTIVE.

I'D PREFER NOT TO BE LEFT OUT OF THIS DISCUSSION, MR. LUDWIG.

ANNOYED

ALSO...

...YOU REALIZE THAT WOULD MEAN I'D BE TAKING HER HIGHNESS INTO THE FOREST BY HERSELF, RIGHT?

WE OF THE PRINCESS GUARD WOULD FOLLOW—

WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!

YOUR ARMOR STANDS OUT LIKE A SORE THUMB.

...YOU'RE WILLING TO STRIP DOWN?

HEH

YOUR ARMOR'S SUPPOSED TO BE A SYMBOL, RIGHT? COULD YOU TAKE IT OFF?

THINGS ARE TENSE IN THE FOREST RIGHT NOW.

DO YOU LIKE THE IDEA OF TELLING HIS HIGHNESS YOU PROVOKED THE LULUS AND STARTED A WAR?

!

UNLESS...

OUR PRIDE LIES IN OUR DUTY! WE WILL PROTECT HER HIGHNESS, WHEREVER SHE MAY GO!

IF WE MUST, THEN WE SHALL!

REMOVE YOUR ARMOR! WE TRAVEL WITH SWORDS ONLY!

YES, SIR!

...

PRINCESS GUARD! DROP YOUR GEAR!

IS THIS REALLY HOW A BUNCH OF ELITES WOULD ACT?

THEIR SKILL AND LOYALTY ASIDE, THE ONE THING THE IMPERIAL GUARD'S KNOWN FOR ABOVE ALL ELSE IS THEIR INTENSE PRIDE.

...THEIR DEVOTION TO THE PRINCESS IS TEMPERING THEIR HUBRIS?

FRET

COULD THIS MEAN...

TWO MEN.

SIGH

THAT'S ENOUGH, CAPTAIN.

MM

YOU'VE MADE YOUR POINT, AND WE'LL NEED YOU AND YOUR MEN TO DISTRACT VISCOUNT BERMAN IN THE MEANTIME.

HUH?!

BUT, SIR!

YOU MAY SEND A PAIR OF SOLDIERS WITH HER HIGHNESS. THE REST WILL ACCOMPANY US.

NOT TO MENTION...

SMIRK

...MY CURIOSITY'S BEEN PIQUED.

TURN

WILL THAT BE SATIS-FACTORY?

UH.

WELL... SURE.

IF YOU'RE WILLING TO GO THAT FAR, I'VE GOT NO REASON TO SAY NO.

JUST WHAT SORT OF PRINCESS WOULD INSPIRE THIS SORT OF LOYALTY FROM HER GUARDS?

WHY AM I NOT BEING ALLOWED A WORD IN EDGE-WISE?

MIA HAS REALIZED THERE'S NO PLACE FOR HER IN THE CONVERSATION!

Y—

Y-Y—

YES, I MOST CERTAINLY DO!

EEP

THERE YOU ARE, YOUR HIGHNESS.

I TRUST YOU HAVE NO CONCERNS?

おそる TREMBLE

おそる TREMBLE

SMILE

CRINGE
べ～～～

...I HAVE NOTHING BUT CONCERNS!

AS A MATTER OF FACT...

TMP

TMP

UGH...

Chapter 25

HOW IN THE MOONS DID IT COME TO THIS?

UGH!

SHIVER

GLANCE

I BELIEVE YOU SHOULD INSPECT THE FOREST WITH CAPTAIN DION.

WHY MUST I TRAVEL WITH THE VERY MAN WHO BEHEADED ME?!

YOU'RE RELAXED, AND YOU LET THE HORSE'S STEPS FLOW THROUGH YOU.

NOT MANY NOBLE GIRLS COULD MANAGE THAT!

HEY, PRINCESS!

YOUR RIDING'S SHAPING UP REAL NICE.

THIS VICE-CAPTAIN IS A RATHER CONSIDER-ATE MAN.

HE'S BEEN PAYING CLOSE ATTENTION TO ME THIS WHOLE TIME.

HE MAY LOOK LIKE A BANDIT, BUT HE DOESN'T SEEM LIKE A BAD PERSON.

MY!

HOW VERY KIND OF YOU.

HMM...

CAPTAIN, NO!!!

MAYBE HE'LL KEEP HIS CAPTAIN UNDER CONTROL IF THINGS GET OUT OF HAND?

IF I CAN GET ON GOOD TERMS WITH HIM...

MIA'S CALCULATING INSTINCTS SPRING INTO ACTION!

EVEN DURING THE SUMMER HOLIDAYS, MIA MADE A POINT OF RIDING HORSES WHEN SHE HAD THE TIME.

OHO HO HO

NOT TO MEN-TION...

YOUR RIDING'S SHAPING UP REAL NICE.

IF THE WORST COMES TO PASS, ALL I'LL BE ABLE TO RELY ON ARE MY LOYAL SUBJECTS AND MY ABILITY TO FLEE, FAST.

BRUSH...

IN OTHER WORDS, MY RIDING SKILLS COULD BE ALL THAT STAND BETWEEN ME AND THE GUILLOTINE!

AHH...

WELL, THING IS—

NOT A CHANCE.

I WONDER ABOUT THAT?

TEE HEE

LET'S SAY, HYPOTHETICALLY, THAT CAPTAIN DION WAS CHASING ME.

DO YOU THINK I COULD MAKE IT ACROSS THE BORDER SAFELY?

AH!

SORRY, BUT I'D TRACK YOU DOWN IN A MATTER OF DAYS.

GIVE YOURSELF ANOTHER TEN YEARS, AND YOU COULD BE AS GOOD OF A RIDER AS HE IS!

W-WELL...

...YOU NEVER KNOW!

Days...

SO IF YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT FLEEING THE EMPIRE TO ELOPE, YOU'D BETTER MAKE SURE I NEVER FIND OUT.

IF MY DIARY'S TO BE TRUSTED...

GLOOM

...THEN I HAVE **FIVE** YEARS BEFORE THE REVOLUTION, AT MOST!

YES, I'M SURE.

JUST TEN YEARS...

MIA'S SPIRITS PLUMMET!

MY! YOUR HORSE...

YEAH?

!

WHINNY

ESPECIALLY ITS HAIR! WHAT A LOVELY MANE.

WHY, IT'S BEAUTIFUL!

HEH HEH HEH!

TRUTH IS, I WASH IT MYSELF WITH A SPECIAL HORSE SHAMPOO I GET FROM ABROAD!

OH! YOU CAN TELL, PRINCESS?

GRIN

I'M SURE THAT SHAMPOO MUST WORK WONDERS.

MY!

IS THAT SO?

YOU CERTAINLY TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOUR STEED.

HOW STRANGE, THOUGH. I FEEL A SORT OF CONNECTION WITH YOUR STEED.

IT'S AS IF WE SHARE SOMETHING WE HOLD DEAR...

HA HA HA

YOU KNOW YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT A HORSE, RIGHT?

OH! THE FOREST IS JUST UP AHEAD.

OUTSKIRTS OF THE SEALENCE FOREST

NO...

IT'S NOT THAT. THIS FEELS DIFFERENT.

AM I IMAGINING IT...

...OR DOES EVERYONE SEEM RATHER ON EDGE?

YOUR HIGHNESS IS HERE, SO IT'S ONLY NATURAL FOR THE MEN TO BE NERVOUS.

THE ATMOSPHERE HERE FEELS STRAINED.

IT'S LIKE THE CALM BEFORE A STORM.

IN SOME WAYS, IT ALMOST FEELS...

...LIKE THE NIGHT BEFORE THE REVOLUTION BEGAN.

WELL, AIN'T THAT SOME-THING?

IT SEEMS YOUR HIGH-NESS HAS SOME REAL INTUITION.

JUMP

!

THIS IS A BATTLEFIELD.

THEY HAVE TO BE.

IF THEY AREN'T, THEY WON'T SURVIVE.

AND THE SOLDIERS KNOW IT. THEY'RE READY TO FIGHT AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE.

WHO KNEW THEY WERE IN SUCH A CRUEL SITUATION?

MY!

WHO COULD STAND TO WORK FOR A MAN WHO DOESN'T SEE PEOPLE AS PEOPLE, LET ALONE IN AN ATMOSPHERE LIKE THIS?

HAVING A DREADFUL BERSERKER AS A CAPTAIN WOULD BE BAD ENOUGH!

I FEEL TERRIBLY SORRY FOR THEM...

YOU NEVER KNOW.

MAYBE SHE IS THE SAGE PEOPLE MAKE HER OUT TO BE.

HMM.

SHE CAN SYMPATHIZE WITH THOSE WHO ENDURE THE ABUSIVE WHIMS OF NOBILITY, EH?

DION, FOR ALL HIS STRENGTHS, IS NOT A MIND READER!

SO, UMM...

IS THERE A PARTICULAR NEED FOR TROOPS TO BE STATIONED HERE?

PERSONALLY SPEAKING?

I DON'T THINK SO.

SIGH

THING IS, WE'RE HERE ON ORDERS.

WE CAN'T LEAVE WITHOUT A GOOD REASON.

IF ANYTHING, US BEING HERE ONLY MAKES A BATTLE MORE LIKELY.

IN THAT CASE...

EVEN IF I DO THINK WITH-DRAWING WOULD BE BETTER FOR EVERYONE.

...

STARE

A GOOD REASON...

A PRETEXT TO WITH-DRAW...

SMILE

BA-DUMP

HMM...

THIS IS QUITE THE CONUN-DRUM.

BA-DUMP

SMILE

SMILE

WHOA... SHE'S LOVELY...

THAT'S HER HIGHNESS, PRINCESS MIA?

A HUNDRED SOLDIERS SUCCUMB INSTANTLY TO MIA'S MEAGER CHARMS!

SHE CAME ALL THE WAY HERE JUST TO MEET WITH FOOT SOLDIERS LIKE US?

BUT I STILL HAVE A TRUMP CARD.

ONE THAT WILL LET ME GET AWAY WITH MOST ANYTHING.

I HAVE THE PRIVILEGE TO BE SELFISH!

THESE SOLDIERS MAY HAVE BEEN DISPATCHED BY THE EBONY MOON MINISTRY...

...BUT A DEMAND FROM THE EMPEROR'S DAUGHTER COULD OVERTURN THOSE ORDERS.

HOWEVER...

NO, OUT OF THE QUES-TION.

THEY'D SEE IT AS THE BABBLING OF A MIS-CHIEVOUS CHILD.

GRA HA HA

PRETENDING TO BE A GEN-ERAL, YOUR HIGHNESS?

REAL BOLD OF YOU!

IF I WERE TO SAY...

I ORDER YOU AND YOUR TROOPS TO WITH-DRAW!

BAM!

...APROPOS OF NOTHING, THEN...

I NEED TO CRAFT A LOGICAL REASON FOR ME TO MAKE THAT SORT OF SELFISH REQUEST!

...BUT ASKING FOR TROOPS TO WITHDRAW WOULD HARDLY BE SO SIMPLE.

ASKING FOR A PRESENT IS ONE THING...

...SO...

IF ONLY THERE WERE A GOOD WAY FOR ME TO DO...

UGH...

HUH?

GLANCE

UMM...

WHERE ARE WE?

HM?

DAZED

...UH?

DIDN'T I TELL YOU? WE'RE HEADING INTO THE FOREST.

THE FRONT LINE?!

TH—

TH—

HORROR

LIKE I SAID.

WE'RE AT THE FRONT LINE RIGHT NOW.

SHUDDER

WH-WHY WOULD YOU LEAD ME TO A PLACE LIKE **THIS** WHILE I WAS LOST IN THOUGHT?!

NOBODY'S GOING TO POP OUT TO TRY AND KILL US UNLESS WE PROVOKE THEM.

YEAH.

GRANTED, THERE HASN'T BEEN ANY FIGHTING YET.

JUST SO YOU KNOW, YOUR HIGHNESS...

...YOU SHOULD KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF EVERYTHING IN THE FOREST.

WHY AM I HERE?!

I JUST WANTED TO STOP ANY FIGHTS FROM BREAKING OUT!

I CAME HERE FOR AN INSPECTION—NOT TO INSPECT THE FOREST ITSELF!

OH, RIGHT.

GAPE

HUH?

I WOULD ASK FOR NO SUCH THING!

I WANT NOTHING LESS THAN FOR ARROWS TO COME FLYING AT ME! HOW TERRIFYING!

An arrow?!

THE LULUS CONSIDER THE TREES HERE A TREASURE GIFTED TO THEM BY GOD.

PUT SO MUCH AS A SCRATCH ON THEM, AND YOU'D BE ASKING FOR AN ARROW TO THE HEAD!

GLANCE

きょろ…

SHUDDER

EEEEEEEK!

I—

I THINK I'VE SEEN QUITE ENOUGH!

LET US RETURN TO TOWN AT—

SPIN

TMP

HII

THWUMP

BWAUGH!

WE'RE NOT IN THE CAPITAL RIGHT NOW.

BLUSH...

...

ARE YOU IN-JURED?!

YOUR HIGHNESS! ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?!

SIGH

PLEASE WATCH YOUR STEP, YOUR HIGHNESS.

I-IT'S...

IT'S THAT ROOT'S FAULT FOR STICKING UP LIKE THAT.

OH!

THIS TREE JUST HAD TO—

YES. THAT'S IT...

IT WAS THE TREE.

THIS IS ALL *ITS* FAULT...

STARE

ど？

SMIRK

?

YOUR HIGHNESS?

HOW *DARE* YOU?

YOU THINK YOU CAN TRIP ME LIKE THAT?

STOMP

I WON'T TAKE THIS IMPUDENCE FROM A TREE!

!!!

TENSE

TCH!

SHING!

WSH

FOUR ARROWS.

ALL DEAD-ON ACCURATE.

THAT'S A HUNTING TRIBE FOR YOU.

BUT TOO BAD FOR THEM...

CHNK!!
ポト
TMP

...UH?

AH...

HUH?

SHUDDER!!!

EEK!

GLAAANCE...

AAA-AAA-HHH!

DROP...

CLACK

CAPTAIN!

すちゃ TCHK

AH!

DASH!!

FWSHK-

FALL BACK!

GET OUT OF THE FOREST!

WITH ALL DUE RESPECT...

...I'M GONNA KILL YOU FOR THIS, YOUR HIGHNESS.

I *TOLD* YOU TO KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF ANYTHING IN THE FOREST!

I WARNED YOU, IF YOU RECALL!

RUMBLE

FLINCH

EEEK!

QUIVER
QUIVER
QUIVER
QUIVER
QUIVER

W-

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE I'M DOING? I'LL GET YOU BACK TO THE CAMP.

W-W-WE SHOULD RUN AWAY!

NO— TO TOWN!

I WON'T FEEL SAFE UNTIL WE'RE BACK AT THE VISCOUNT'S MANOR!

HUFF

CLENCH

WELL, THAT WORKS OUT.

FAIR ENOUGH.

FEEL FREE TO HEAD BACK WITH YOUR GUARDS.

I'LL SEND A TROOP OF MEN TO ESCORT YOU.

TH—

THAT'S NOT ENOUGH!

?

THERE WE HAVE IT.

AT THE END OF THE DAY, SHE'S JUST A SELFISH CHILD.

SIGH

WHAT'S NOT ENOUGH?

...

WHAT ARE YOU GETTING AT, YOUR HIGHNESS?

...BUT I'M THE IMPERIAL PRINCESS! DO YOU TRULY THINK A SINGLE TROOP IS ENOUGH TO PROTECT ME?

IT WOULD BE ONE THING IF YOUR MEN WERE ELITES...

BRING ALL OF THEM!

I WANT EVERY ONE OF YOUR MEN TO ESCORT ME TO THE VISCOUNTY TOWN!

MY SELFISH DESIRE TO FLEE...

...WILL GIVE HIM A REASON TO PULL BACK HIS TROOPS!

HOLD ON, PRINCESS!

THAT'S GOING A LITTLE TOO FAR!

RIGHT, CAPTAIN?

MOVING AN ARMY TAKES TIME, YOUR HIGHNESS.

WE HAVE A CAMP TO TAKE DOWN AND SUPPLIES TO TRANS-PORT.

THAT LOOK IN HER EYES...

STARE

YOU MEAN THOSE ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN ENSURING MY SAFETY?

YOU'RE ABSOLUTELY RIGHT.

OH, I GET IT.

FSH

Oop!

GRAB

TOSS

!

WHOOSH

...

WELL, YOU HEARD HER HIGHNESS.

ONCE WE GET BACK TO CAMP, GET THE MEN AND HORSES READY TO MOVE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

...!

C-CAPTAIN?!

JUST HOLD ON, YOUR HIGHNESS.

ORDERS ARE ORDERS!

IT SEEMS HER HIGHNESS HAS A LOW OPINION OF OUR MEN'S COMPETENCE.

WE'LL HAVE THEM MARCH HER ALL THE WAY BACK TO THE MANOR IN PERFECT FORMATION, AND RECTIFY HER MISCONCEPTION!

PHEW

...

WE'LL BE OUT OF THE FOREST BEFORE YOU KNOW IT.

SHUDDER

THAT WAS TERRIFYING!

TH—

TH—

I WANT EVERY ONE OF YOUR MEN TO ESCORT ME TO THE VISCOUNTY TOWN!

THANKS TO MY SHOW OF SELFISHNESS THE SOLDIERS CAN WITHDRAW, BUT...

MY SPUR-OF-THE-MOMENT PLAN WORKED, SOMEHOW.

...IF I LOOK AWAY, HE'LL KILL ME!

STARE

HUH?

WINCE

I'M...

UGH...

I'M SO SPENT, I MIGHT DROP DEAD HERE AND NOW!

MIA, WHO HADN'T DARED TO SO MUCH AS BLINK, FOUND HERSELF SUFFERING A MINOR CASE OF EYE STRAIN.

パーアーハーイー

I'M BACK!

BERMAN VIS-COUNTY

AND THANK THE MOONS, I'M ALIVE!

ーインナーエー

Chapter 26

?

I ALMOST FORGOT.

THERE'S ONE MORE THING I MUST ASK OF YOU ALL.

AH!

IF ANYONE ASKS, I ENDED UP A LITTLE JUMBLED AFTER TRIPPING OVER A TREE ROOT.

UNDER-STOOD?

I'D LIKE YOU TO KEEP WHAT HAPPENED IN THE FOREST A STRICT SECRET.

I'LL BE ON MY WAY, THEN! GOOD DAY TO YOU!

...

HUH?

BLUUU

UUUSH

ESPECIALLY SINCE I ALMOST GOT MYSELF SHOT IN THE PROCESS! OH, THE SHAME!

I CAN'T HAVE PEOPLE FINDING OUT I THREW A TANTRUM AT A TREE FOR TRIPPING ME!

MIA CHOOSES THE WEIRDEST POSSIBLE PART TO FEEL EMBAR-RASSED ABOUT!

WHAT IF SOMETHING HAPPENS IN THE FOREST? WITH NO TROOPS TO WATCH OVER—

I'M TOLD OUR ENTIRE FORCE HAS WITHDRAWN TO THE VISCOUNTY TOWN!

YOUR HIGHNESS! WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?!

ARE YOU IMPLYING THAT A MERE HANDFUL OF MEN WOULD HAVE ENSURED MY SAFETY?

OH?

WHAT I MEAN IS THAT YOUR HIGHNESS GOING TO SUCH A DANGEROUS PLACE WITHOUT INFORMING ME POSES PROBLEMS, SO TO SPEAK.

ALL OF THE EMPIRE'S LANDS ARE THE IMPERIAL FAMILY'S LANDS.

I...

W-WELL, NO, OF COURSE NOT.

YOU SAID THAT THE AREA IS DANGEROUS, AND YET YOU'D HAVE ME RETURN WITH JUST TWO OF MY OWN GUARDS?

BEAM

AS THE EMPEROR'S DAUGHTER, THERE IS NOWHERE I CANNOT GO, AND NO ONE WHO CAN STOP ME.

OR DO YOU THINK OTHER-WISE?

OF ALL THE SELFISH...

GRR...

THIS REMINDS ME OF THE GOOD OLD DAYS! HOW VERY REFRESHING!

...AND BUSTING IT OUT AGAIN LEAVES HER DELIGHTED!

INDEED.

IN THE PREVIOUS TIMELINE, THIS SORT OF SELFISHNESS WAS MIA'S MODUS OPERANDI...

I WISH TO DISCUSS THOSE FORESTED LANDS WITH MY FATHER.

I'LL NEED YOU TO REFRAIN FROM ANY CLEARING OR MILITARY OPERATIONS IN THE MEANTIME.

AH, THAT REMINDS ME!

HMM?

WHAT DANGER COULD THERE BE, SO LONG AS THE VIS-COUNTY TOWN IS PROPERLY FORTIFIED?

I mean...

I'M AFRAID THAT WOULD BE MUCH TOO DANGER-OUS.

WITHOUT THE MILITARY AROUND, WHO WILL KEEP THOSE VICIOUS TRIBESMEN FROM COM-MITTING ANY ATROCITIES?

THAT'S NONSE—

AH! UM, BEG YOUR PARDON...

SLAM

PERHAPS THE NEARBY VILLAGES MAY BE AT RISK...BUT WHAT DOES THAT MATTER TO YOU?

THAT'S HOW A TYPICAL IMPERIAL NOBLE WOULD SEE IT, AT LEAST.

...!

THAT'S A PERSPECTIVE YOU CAN'T LET YOURSELF REFUTE, ISN'T IT?

WELL THEN, I BELIEVE THIS MATTER IS SETTLED.

I TRUST YOU'LL MAKE THE NECESSARY ARRANGE-MENTS.

TURN

...

CLICK

GUEST CHAM-BERS

HUH?

WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR HAIRPIN, MILADY?

HM...?

HUH?

HOW ODD... IT REALLY IS GONE!

PAP

WHOOP

...IT MUST HAVE FALLEN SOMEWHERE...

AH

I DON'T RECALL TAKING IT OFF.

WHICH WOULD MEAN...

HMM...

EEEK

IT'S IN THE FOREST?!

O—

?

O-O-OH, NO!

THIS IS NOT GOOD!

I'M REASONABLY CERTAIN I'VE PREVENTED THE CONFLICT THAT WOULD HAVE BROKEN OUT HERE.

HOWEVER...

IF SOMETHING LIKE THAT'S JUST LYING AROUND...

...IT COULD BE THE SPARK THAT LIGHTS A FUSE LEADING STRAIGHT TO THE REVOLUTION!

This is made of Unicorn's Horn!

That princess was wearing it!

She didn't just kick a tree...

...she made one into a hairpin?

Let's get her!

THAT HAIRPIN CAME FROM THE FOREST!

IT'S DEEPLY CONNECTED TO THIS WHOLE SITUATION!

AND FINALLY, THE GUIL-LOTINE...

N-NO WAY... I REFUSE TO GO THROUGH THAT AGAIN!

ET...

EEEK

ROLL

ROLL

HERE!

IT'S A THANK-YOU GIFT!

AND THAT'S NOT ALL...

THAT PIN IS A KEEPSAKE OF HIS MOTHER.

...

HOW SAD WOULD THAT BOY BE IF HE FOUND OUT I LOST IT?

I HAVE TO GO AND FIND THAT PIN.

I NEED IT BACK.

FOR SOME REASON...

...I CAN'T STAND THE THOUGHT OF IT.

CLENCH

ANNE...

WHAT DO YOU MEAN, MILADY?

WOULD YOU PLEASE ASK LUDWIG TO COME SPEAK WITH ME?

UGH...

LOOKS LIKE WE'RE FINALLY DONE, FOR NOW.

WE'RE LUCKY IT WAS ONLY A HUNDRED. WE HAD TO SPREAD THEM ACROSS ABOUT TEN TOWNS, SURE, BUT AT LEAST WE MANAGED.

IF I HAD A THOUSAND—OR ***TEN*** THOUSAND—THERE'S NO WAY WE'D HAVE FOUND ENOUGH BEDS AND FOOD FOR EVERYONE.

CRACK

コキ

コキ

CRACK

THAT WAS A HELL OF A JOB.

FINDING ROOMS FOR A HUNDRED MEN'S EASIER SAID THAN DONE.

BY THE WAY...

YOU'RE THE LEAST AMBITIOUS PERSON I'VE EVER MET, I SWEAR.

IF THERE'S A ROUND OF PROMOTIONS COMING UP, I HOPE THEY LEAVE ME OUT OF IT.

HM?

ABOUT WHAT?

...GUESS YOU WERE RIGHT AFTER ALL, HUH?

ABOUT HOW NOTHING IN LIFE EVER WORKS OUT THE WAY YOU WANT IT TO.

...A *STRICT* SECRET!

NOT TO MENTION ALL THAT JUST A BIT AGO.

YOU SAW THE PRINCESS, KICKING A TREE, THEN DRAGGING THE WHOLE ARMY BACK WITH HER...

...

...BUT AT THE END OF THE DAY, ALL NOBLES ARE THE SAME.

AFTER ALL THOSE RUMORS ABOUT HER BEING SOME "GREAT SAGE," I WAS HOPING SHE'D BE A LITTLE BETTER THAN THE REST...

VANOS.

MAKE NO MISTAKE... SHE'S A MASTERMIND.

HUH?

I'D TREAD CAREFULLY AROUND THE PRINCESS, IF I WERE YOU.

BUT...I MEAN...

SHAKE...

SHE KNOWS WHAT SHE'S DOING. MARK MY WORDS.

WSH...

GIVE HER COMMAND OF AN ARMY, AND SHE'LL MAKE IT LOOK LIKE SHE'S LOSING UNTIL SHE SNATCHES VICTORY AT THE LAST SECOND.

RIGHT...

CLUNK

CAPTAIN DION!

CLATTER

AH!

YEAH. YOU'RE THE IMPERIAL GUARDS FROM THE FOREST, RIGHT?

YOU HERE FOR A DRINK TOO?

SALUTE

GREETINGS! HAVE YOU FINISHED MAKING ALL THE ARRANGE-MENTS?

PLEASE ACCEPT OUR DEEPEST APOLOGIES FOR THE TROUBLE HER HIGHNESS HAS CAUSED.

TROUBLE?

BOW

IF AT ALL POSSIBLE, PLEASE OVERLOOK HER BEHAVIOR.

I CAN ONLY ASSUME SHE WAS SHAKEN BY SUCH A CLOSE BRUSH WITH DANGER.

SHE DOESN'T USUALLY ACT SO ARROGANT.

THEM TOO? BLOODY HELL...

UGH.

IF ANYTHING, I THINK I NEED TO THANK THE PRINCESS FOR HER HELP.

An ale, thanks.

HUH?

IT'S NOT MY JOB TO EXPLAIN THESE THINGS, BUT HERE WE GO AGAIN...

IT WASN'T TROUBLE, AND I DON'T MIND.

STILL DON'T GET IT?

WHAT? BUT... HOW WOULD THAT...?

THAT WAS ALL A BLUFF.

SHE WAS ACTING.

SWIG...

UM, CAPTAIN DION...

Here ya go!

WHAT DO YOU MEAN, A BLUFF?

CLUNK

...BUT THE THING ABOUT ARMIES IS THAT THEY APPLY PRESSURE JUST BY BEING THERE.

I'M BETTING YOU TWO HAVE NEVER BEEN ON A REAL BATTLEFIELD, SO YOU MIGHT NOT UNDER-STAND THIS...

IT GETS THEM THINKING YOU MIGHT MAKE THE FIRST MOVE— AND IT'S ALL TOO EASY FOR THAT SUSPICION TO TURN INTO OPEN HOSTILITY.

AGAINST DETERMINED FIGHTERS WHO'RE BRACED FOR WAR, THOUGH? NOT SO MUCH.

AND THAT WORKS GREAT WHEN IT COMES TO KEEPING BANDITS AND THE LIKE IN CHECK.

YOUR PRINCESS NOTICED THAT TENSION...

...AND SHE DECIDED TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.

AH

...!

WHEN YOU'RE STARING DOWN AN OPPONENT'S BLADE, IT DOESN'T TAKE MUCH TO CONVINCE YOU TO START SWINGING.

THE PROBLEM IS THAT THOSE SUBTLETIES ARE TOTALLY LOST ON THE HIGHER-UPS.

LEAVING THE FOREST ALONE WOULD BE ENOUGH TO AVOID ANY NEEDLESS VIOLENCE.

THE LULU TRIBE WASN'T GOING TO COME OUT OF THE FOREST AND RAID US TO BEGIN WITH.

!

OH...? IS THAT WHAT SHE WAS GOING FOR?

STOMP

BY PUTTING HERSELF IN DANGER, SHE GAVE HERSELF AN EXCUSE TO "RUN AWAY" AND MOVE THE WHOLE FRONT WITH HER.

THAT'S WHY YOUR PRINCESS TOOK THINGS INTO HER OWN HANDS AND FORCED A CHANGE.

GULP...

QUESTION IS, WHAT'S SHE GONNA DO WITH THE TIME SHE'S BOUGHT?

SHE'S FORCED THE ARMY TO BACK DOWN AND EASED TENSIONS FOR NOW.

BUT THAT'S JUST A STOPGAP SOLUTION. IT WON'T LAST.

WELL, LOOK AT ME NOW.

SEEMS I'M LOOKING FORWARD TO WHAT SHE'LL DO NEXT.

HEH...

THE TWO OF YOU COULD MAKE OR BREAK HER HIGHNESS'S ENTIRE PLAN.

SO...

YOU GET IT NOW, RIGHT?

HUH?

THAT GOES WITHOUT SAYING!

W—

WE WON'T!

WHY AM I OF ALL PEOPLE GOING AROUND DEFENDING THE PRINCESS, ANYWAY?

IF YOU WANT HER PLAN TO WORK, YOU HAVE TO DO AS SHE SAID AND NOT TELL A SOUL ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED IN THAT FOREST.

YOU CAN'T THINK HIS MAJESTY WOULD LET IT SLIDE IF HE LEARNED THE LULUS TRIED TO MAKE A PINCUSHION OF HIS DAUGHTER, RIGHT?

Huh?!

They did what to my darling little Mia?!

I GET THE FEELING HER MIND MOVES SO FAST, SHE FORGETS TO EXPLAIN WHAT SHE'S THINKING TO HER AIDES.

LIKE THAT ONE OFFICIAL SHE BROUGHT WITH HER...

I'D BET SHE'S PUT HIM THROUGH HELL AND BACK AGAIN.

CAPTAIN DION.

CHEERS TO HIM, THE POOR BASTARD...

CLACK

HEH...

I'M NOT IN HIS BOAT, AND I DOUBT I EVER WILL BE.

NOT THAT IT'S ANY OF MY BUSI-NESS.

CAN YOU SPARE A MOMENT?

HER HIGHNESS WOULD LIKE TO SPEAK WITH YOU.

IF YOU WOULD ACCOMPANY ME, PLEASE.

AHH...

GUESS I SPOKE TOO SOON.

OUR BOATS MIGHT LOOK AWFULLY SIMILAR AFTER ALL...

FIDGET...

I APOLOGIZE FOR TROU-BLING YOU, CAPTAIN DION.

AS COMMON SOLDIERS, IT'S OUR DUTY TO OBEY YOUR WISHES NO MATTER THE TIME OR PLACE, YOUR HIGHNESS.

KNEEL

THINK NOTHING OF IT.

TWITCH

WELL, ANYWAY!

THERE'S SOMETHING I'D LIKE TO ASK FOR YOUR HELP WITH.

I-IS THAT SO?

IT'S A LITTLE UNNERVING TO HEAR THAT FROM YOU, SOMEHOW...

...TO FIND YOUR *HAIRPIN?*

SO, YOU'RE SAYING THAT YOU WANT TO GO BACK TO THE FOREST...

TRUTH BE TOLD, I RECEIVED IT FROM A BEGGAR CHILD IN THE NEWMOON DISTRICT.

IT WAS AN HEIRLOOM FROM HIS MOTHER, IT SEEMS.

SHE HASN'T SEEMED LIKE THE SORT OF PERSON TO GET HUNG UP ON STUFF LIKE THAT.

IS IT REALLY VALUABLE OR SOME-THING?

YES...

MAYBE IT WAS A PRESENT FROM SOMEONE SPECIAL?

Oo

I'M AWARE THAT THIS IS A SELFISH REQUEST.

STILL...

IF I DON'T, I'LL GET THE GUIL-LOTINE!

SURE. I DON'T MIND.

...HUH?

A CHILD FROM THE SLUMS...?

HEIRLOOM OR NOT, HOW COULD IT BE IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO DRIVE HER ALL THE WAY BACK TO THE FOREST?

THE LEAST I CAN DO IS INDULGE A SELFISH REQUEST OR TWO.

YOU DID ME A GREAT FAVOR BY ALLOWING ME TO WITHDRAW MY TROOPS, YOUR HIGHNESS.

MOST PROMINENTLY: SELF-PROTECTION.

...THERE'S MORE TO THIS THAN JUST SELFISHNESS, RIGHT?

NOT TO MENTION...

FLINCH

SHUDDER

US? ALONE?!

YOU?! JUST YOU?!

BUT I CAN BRING YOU THERE MYSELF, IF YOU DON'T MIND.

I CAN'T MOVE THE TROOPS, OF COURSE.

?

SHUDDER

...THAT WILL HAVE TO DO...

I SUP-POSE...

I-I...

CAPTAIN DION.

IF I MAY, PLEASE DO EVERYTHING IN YOUR POWER TO ENSURE HER HIGHNESS RETURNS SAFELY.

THE EMPIRE NEEDS HER— BOTH NOW, AND IN THE FUTURE.

AH, MR. LUDWIG.

TRUST ME, I'LL DO MY BEST.

I REPAY MY DEBTS, AND I OWE HER HIGHNESS A BIG ONE.

ALSO...

IF I COULD MAKE ONE MORE REQUEST.

ME, JOIN HER CAUSE?

THAT'S QUITE THE ASK, ISN'T IT?

ESPECIALLY CONSIDERING YOUR DEAR PRINCESS DOESN'T SEEM VERY FOND OF ME.

YES? WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU, MR. LUDWIG?

ONCE THIS INCIDENT IS SETTLED, I WOULD LIKE YOU TO JOIN OUR CAUSE AS ONE OF HER HIGHNESS'S ALLIES.

CONSIDERING YOUR SKILL WITH A BLADE, I'M SURE YOU'D BE THE MOST RELIABLE GUARD SHE COULD ASK FOR.

IT'S A TEMPTING PROPOSAL INDEED... BUT NO.

ACTUALLY, WHEN I PUT IT THAT WAY, IT DOESN'T SOUND HALF BAD.

AM I SUPPOSED TO JOIN THE IMPERIAL GUARD AND DO THE WHOLE SERVE AND PROTECT THING?

WHAT EXACTLY WOULD THAT ENTAIL, ANYWAY?

I WANT YOU TO BECOME A GENERAL.

...HUH?

...

IN ORDER FOR HER HIGHNESS TO DO AS SHE PLEASES, SHE'LL NEED MORE THAN JUST OFFICE TYPES LIKE ME.

REALLY?

NOD

ME? A *GENERAL?*

I HAVE STRINGS I CAN PULL IN THE GOLDEN MOON MINISTRY AND OTHER DOMESTIC DEPARTMENTS.

THERE, I'M WELL-CONNECTED.

WHEN IT COMES TO THE MILITARY, HOWEVER— THAT IS, THE EBONY MOON MINISTRY— I HAVE NO INFLUENCE.

SHE'LL NEED ALLIES IN THE MILITARY, AS WELL.

AND NOT JUST ANY ALLIES— ONES WHO UNDERSTAND HER AMBITIONS AND HAVE THE SKILL TO REALIZE THEM.

SO YOU WANT ME TO CLAW MY WAY UP TO THE TOP AND HELP HER FROM THERE?

EXACTLY.

AND YET...

PLUS, I'VE NEVER BEEN INTERESTED IN TITLES OR PRESTIGE.

THAT'D BE EVEN TOUGHER THAN PUTTING MY LIFE ON THE LINE AS AN IMPERIAL GUARD.

...THAT SOUNDS LIKE IT MIGHT BE FUN.

YOU KNOW...

IF I'M GOING TO PUT MY LIFE ON THE LINE FOR SOMEONE, WHY NOT MAKE IT HER?

BETTER TO DIE FOR THE PRINCESS THAN TO DIE CARRYING OUT THE BRAINDEAD ORDERS OF SOME RANDOM NOBLE.

HEH...

TWITCH

!

AND THAT'S NOT EVEN STARTING ON RESOLVING THIS WHOLE...

'SCUSE ME?

HMPH

THERE'S NO GUARANTEE I'LL EVEN MAKE IT OUT OF THE FOREST ALIVE, AFTER ALL.

WELL, NO POINT IN ME MAKING PROMISES NOW, REGARDLESS.

WHAT'S SO FUNNY?

OH, DON'T MIND ME...

IT'S NOTHING, REALLY.

LET ME GUESS: I'M WASTING MY TIME WORRYING BECAUSE HER HIGHNESS IS SURE TO FIND A WAY TO FIX THIS MESS.

IS THAT WHAT YOU'RE THINKING?

THAT'S PART OF IT, YES.

BUT EVEN MORE THAN THAT...

I SEE NOW...

IT'S TRUE THAT I'M NOT WORRIED.

I THOUGHT THAT WAS BECAUSE I WAS CONFIDENT IN MY OWN ABILITIES.

...I'M AMUSED BECAUSE IT SEEMS THAT YOU THINK SO AS WELL, CAPTAIN DION.

!

...I WAS THINKING THAT AS LONG AS I LEAVE IT TO THE PRINCESS, EVERYTHING WILL TURN OUT OKAY?

THEN AGAIN... COULD IT BE THAT AT THE SAME TIME...

IF I WERE...

...THAT'D BE PRETTY DAMN IRRITATING, HUH?

THE SECRET DISCUSSIONS WHICH TRANSPIRED THAT EVENING WOULD GO DOWN IN THE HISTORY BOOKS.

...AND THE GREAT GENERAL DION ALAIA, LIKEWISE A MEMBER OF THE FOUR.

THEY WOULD TELL OF CHANCELLOR LUDWIG, A MAN WHO WOULD BECOME KNOWN AS ONE OF MIA'S BAND OF FOUR...

BOTH AS FRIENDS, AND AS ALLIES...

...THE TWO OF THEM WOULD DEVOTE THEIR LIVES TO MIA'S CAUSE.

THAT FATEFUL NIGHT, THEIR FIRST MEETING, WAS WHERE IT ALL BEGAN.

Chapter 27

THE SEALANCE FOREST

HERE LIES THE SECLUDED VILLAGE OF THE LULU TRIBE.

THIS SETTLEMENT, HOME TO NEARLY TWO HUNDRED PEOPLE, WAS THE STAGE FOR A GREAT TRAGEDY IN THE PREVIOUS TIMELINE.

MIA'S SELFISH DEMANDS LED TO AN OPEN CONFLICT...

...IN WHICH THE LULUS' SKILLED ARCHERS INFLICTED HEAVY CASUALTIES UPON THE IMPERIAL ARMY.

THE ARMY, IN TURN, CHOSE TO SETTLE THE MATTER FOR GOOD BY BURNING THE FOREST AND SLAUGHTERING THE WHOLE TRIBE.

SOME FEW LULUS WHO WERE AWAY FROM THEIR HOME-LAND WERE SPARED THE CARNAGE. ENRAGED BY THE EMPIRE'S ATROCITY, THEY SOON FELL IN WITH THE REVOLU-TIONARY ARMY.

THERE, THEIR EXPERT SHARPSHOOTING SPELLED DOOM FOR COUNTLESS IMPERIAL SOLDIERS.

...RETREATED?

THE IMPERIAL SOL-DIERS...

THIS TIME, HOW-EVER...

THAT'S VERY POSSIBLE...

HOWEVER, THEIR CAMP IS COMPLETELY EMPTY, AND THEIR PROVI-SIONS REMAIN UNTOUCHED. IT'S BIZARRE.

COULD IT NOT BE A TRAP? PERHAPS THEY'RE LURING US OUT.

YES, CHIEF.

I'M SORRY TO HAVE MADE YOU COME ALL THIS WAY, ONLY FOR IT TO TURN OUT LIKE THIS.

I WAS HOPING YOU COULD PASS THE OUTCOUNT'S MESSAGE ON TO THE IMPERIAL ARMY'S CAPTAIN, BUT...

I DON'T MIND.

HMM...

IN ANY CASE, WE'LL HAVE TO HOLD OUR GROUND FOR NOW.

IT'S ONLY NATURAL TO COME RUNNING WHEN THE TRIBE IS IN DANGER.

WE MAY HAVE TO CONSIDER IT, DEPENDING ON HOW THE MATTER DEVELOPS.

HOWEVER, I FEAR THAT THE OUTLAND COUNT OF RUDOLVON IS THE ONLY NOBLE TRULY NOBLE ENOUGH TO HELP US.

I WAS THINKING OF ASKING MISS TIONA TO BRING IN SOMEONE HIGHER-RANKED TO HELP MEDIATE.

INTERESTING.

CHIEF!

LOOK AT THIS...

BESIDES—

EXCUSE ME!

YOU'RE BEING TOO PESSIMISTIC, CHIEF!

THERE ARE GOOD, RESPECTABLE NOBLES TOO!

A GIRL WHO CAME INTO THE FOREST DROPPED IT.

HM?!

THAT HAIRPIN! IT'S...

UGGGH...

UGH.

GLOOOOM

HOW DID IT COME TO THIS...?

Oh, right!

WE'LL NEED TO STOP BY THE CAMP ALONG THE WAY.

HUH?

Y-YES, OF COURSE...

SMILE

SMILE

I'M SURE YOU'D LIKE A HORSE OF YOUR OWN...

...BUT RIDING AT NIGHT'S DANGEROUS, SO YOU'LL HAVE TO BEAR WITH IT, YOUR HIGHNESS.

Y'KNOW, YOU REALLY BOTCH THE LANDING SOMETIMES, DON'T YOU...

...YOUR HIGH-NESS?

TO STOCK UP ON TORCHES.

OR WERE YOU PLANNING ON SEARCHING FOR YOUR PIN IN A PITCH-BLACK FOREST?

THE CAMP? WHY?

?

?

?

I... WHAT?

WHATEVER DOES HE MEAN BY THAT?

WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT...?

Oh, please!

I GET WHAT YOU'RE ***REALLY*** GOING FOR.

A STORY LIKE THAT COULD TRICK PEOPLE LIKE MY VICE-CAPTAIN, BUT IT WON'T GET YOU MUCH FURTHER.

YOU SHOULD'VE IRONED OUT THE DETAILS MORE—YOU KNOW, COME UP WITH A ***GOOD*** REA-SON TO BE OUT HERE.

REALLY, THE WHOLE SEARCHING THE WOODS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT STORY DIDN'T WORK FROM THE START.

HUH?

WHA?

YOU'RE HERE TO MEET WITH THE TRIBE DIRECTLY AND TALK IT OUT IN PERSON, RIGHT?
.........HUH?
OH? AM I WRONG?
CONSIDERING YOU PULLED ME AWAY FROM MY DRINK TO TREK OUT INTO THE WILDERNESS, I THOUGHT I COULD EXPECT AT LEAST THAT MUCH FROM YOU.
EEP!
DOM
ゴゴゴゴゴゴゴゴゴゴ

YOU REALLY ARE AN INTERESTING ONE, YOUR HIGHNESS!

BEAM

THOUGHT SO!

AND I'LL ***NEED*** YOUR HELP, NATURALLY!

OF COURSE! YOU'RE QUITE RIGHT!

O-O-OF—

I DON'T KNOW EXACTLY WHAT YOUR PLAN IS, BUT I'M WITH YOU ALL THE WAY.

EVEN IF YOU MARCH US STRAIGHT INTO HELL.

Into hell?

HM?

IS THIS... GOING TO BE DANGEROUS? AM I IN TROUBLE?

A REVE-LATION STRIKES MIA:

THE MAN WHO BEHEADED HER IN THE PREVIOUS TIMELINE IS SIT-TING ***DIRECTLY*** BEHIND HER.

WH-WHAT IN THE MOONS AM I DOING?!

I THOUGHT THIS WAS ALL SET-TLED AFTER I PULLED BACK THE TROOPS...

FINDING THE HAIRPIN WAS SUPPOSED TO BE NOTHING MORE THAN A PRECAUTION!

I-I'VE ENTIRELY LET MY GUARD DOWN!

I SHAKE

IT WAS NEITHER CLEVER NOR A METAPHOR.

NO! FOCUS! THIS IS NO TIME FOR CLEVER META-PHORS!

I KNOW WHAT THIS IS!

IT'S LIKE WHEN THE APPETIZERS ARE SO TASTY, YOU FILL UP ON THEM AND MISS OUT ON THE DELICIOUS DESSERT!

SHIVER

U-UGH...

SOMETHING WRONG, YOUR HIGHNESS?

N-NO! NOTHING AT ALL!

WHATEVER HAPPENS, HAPPENS!

IT'S TOO LATE NOW...

CRACKLE

IF...

IT WASN'T LIKE THIS AT ALL DURING THE DAY!

IT'S LIKE A WHOLE DIFFERENT WORLD...

TREMBLE...

IT CERTAINLY IS DARK...

I CAN'T SEE A THING.

EEEK!

JUMP

YOUR HIGH-NESS.

AH!

I-I SEE...

UNDER-STOOD.

NOT MUCH.

JUST THOUGHT YOU'D WANT TO KNOW THAT THIS IS WHERE WE WERE ATTACKED EARLIER.

WH—

WH-WH—

WHAT IS IT?!

ARE YOU, UM...

...ABSOLUTELY SURE THIS IS THE PLACE?

...

LI'STARE...

NO DOUBT ABOUT IT.

LOOK— YOU CAN SEE THE MARK WHERE THE ARROW HIT THAT TREE.

I CAN'T! NOT AT ALL!

TIME TO DIE

B-BUT IF I SAY I WANT TO GO BACK **NOW**, HE'D ROLL HIS EYES AT ME, AT BEST...

...AND AT WORST, IF I MADE HIM **REALLY** ANGRY...

AND REALLY, HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO FIND ANYTHING IN A PLACE LIKE THIS?

...IT SEEMS THINGS ARE GOING JUST ACCORDING TO PLAN.

I-I HAVE TO FIND THAT HAIRPIN, NO MATTER WHAT!

OLAOLAOLA

OLAOLAOLA

...HUH?

WELL, YOUR HIGH-NESS...

YOU THERE!

HOW ABOUT YOU STOP STARING AND SHOW YOURSELVES?

FSH

SO THOSE ARE THE LULUS.

I WONDER IF ANY OF THEM ARE RELATED TO LIORA?

CONSIDERING WE WEREN'T GREETED BY A VOLLEY OF ARROWS, I ASSUME YOU'RE NOT HERE TO FIGHT?

IMPRESSIVE, LEADER OF THE EMPIRE'S WARRIORS.

YOU HAVE GOOD INSIGHT.

GIRL...

YOU ARE PERSON... WHO CAME HERE DURING DAY, YES?

!

STARE

YES, THAT'S RIGHT.

I AM—

GIRL.

WHERE YOU GET THIS?

MY! THAT'S—

WATCH YOUR TONGUE, OLD MAN.

ALL RIGHT, THAT'S QUITE ENOUGH.

SAY WRONG THING, AND I—

ANSWER ME! WHERE YOU GET THIS?!

STEP...

BEFORE YOU STANDS HER HIGHNESS, PRINCESS MIA OF THE TEARMOON EMPIRE... AND I'M RESPONSIBLE FOR HER SAFETY.

TECHNI-CALLY, ANYWAY.

YOU...

ONE WRONG MOVE...

...AND I'LL HAVE TO STOP PLAYING NICE.

MY! THIS...

CRACKLE

CRACKLE

CRACKLE

WHAT AN ABSOLUTE DELIGHT!

...IS SUBLIME!

HOW TRULY, PERFECTLY THRILLING!

THE MAN WHO KILLED ME IS NOW RISKING **HIS** LIFE TO PROTECT ME!

OH HO HO

AND OH, IS IT GLORI-OUS...

AH, YES— I KNOW THIS FEELING!

IT'S THE SAME AS WHEN I WON LUDWIG OVER!

BY THE WAY, YOUR HIGH-NESS...

...I ASSUME YOU KNOW HOW YOU'RE GOING TO HANDLE THIS, RIGHT?

...ER?

TURN

IS ME KILLING THESE PEOPLE PART OF YOUR PLAN OR WHAT? I'D APPRECIATE SOME DIRECTION.

WHAT'S OUR MOVE HERE? FIGHT, OR FLIGHT?

UMM...

JUMP

HYEEEK!

...OR YOU'LL REGRET IT.

YOU'D BETTER KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING...

PANIC

I HAVE TO DO SOMETHING!

THAT'S RIGHT! THIS IS NO TIME TO BE BASKING IN SATISFACTION!

AND NOW THAT I THINK ABOUT IT, DION IS HARDLY MY SWORN ALLY!

HIS HELP IS CONDITIONAL, AND HE FEELS MORE LIKE AN ENEMY THAN ANYTHING ELSE, MOST OF THE TIME.

ゴゴゴ RUUUMBLE...

I HAVE NO IDEA WHY, BUT THAT LULU MAN LOOKS POSITIVELY ENRAGED.

ENDING THIS WITHOUT BLOODSHED IS GOING TO BE DIFFICULT.

THERE'S NOBODY ON MY SIDE HERE AT ALL?

WHICH MEANS... HM?

PLEASE...

I NEED...

I NEED TO THINK OF SOMETHING...

HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO GET BY WITHOUT ANNE OR THAT STUPID FOUR-EYES AROUND?

SPIRAL

SPIRAL

...WAIT!

ぴぇ〜

BWAH

BUT I CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING!

HM? IS THAT...

...LIORA?!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN A PLACE LIKE THIS?

Wh—

ぺこり BOW

YOUR HIGH-NESS...

...IT'S AN HONOR...

...TO SEE YOU!

ACTUALLY... HE IS THE LULU TRIBE CHIEFTAIN.

AND...

...THAT HAIRPIN...

YES...

...OF COURSE.

NO, THAT CAN WAIT.

COULD YOU TELL ME WHY THE GENTLEMAN OVER THERE SEEMS SO UPSET?

THEN, AFTER WIFE DIE...

...GIVE TO DAUGHTER.

THIS PIN, GIVE TO MY WIFE AS GIFT.

YOUR DAUGH-TER?

IS THAT SO...?

IN OTHER WORDS, THAT BOY...

I SEE...

I'M TERRIBLY SORRY TO BE THE BEARER OF BAD NEWS...

...BUT I MUST INFORM YOU THAT YOUR DAUGHTER HAS, SADLY, PASSED AWAY.

!

...THAT HAIRPIN WAS GIVEN TO ME BY A BOY WHO IS LIKELY YOUR GRANDSON.

FURTHER-MORE...

PASSED... AWAY?

TELL ME...

TELL ME MORE.

...

...AND THAT'S ALL.

AT LEAST, AS I UNDER-STAND IT.

CHIEF.

LIORA...

AND WHAT SHE HAS TOLD US MATCHES THE CHARACTER...

...OF THE PRINCESS...

...I KNOW!

HER HIGHNESS IS NOT THE SORT OF PERSON...

...WHO LIES!

...HER HIGHNESS WAS THE ONE WHO SCHEMED HER WAY INTO LETTING US PULL BACK OUR TROOPS.

NOT THAT IT MATTERS, BUT JUST SO YOU KNOW...

HMH...

I WOULDN'T EXPECT A FOOT SOLDIER TO UNDERSTAND THAT...

THE GIRL KICK TREE, NOTHING MORE.

YOU NEED A GOOD REASON IF YOU WANT TO MOVE AN ARMY.

WHAT?

LIES!

I DO.

CLENCH

BUT YOU MUST KNOW... BELIEVING ALL YOUR WORDS...

...IS DIFFICULT.

...

...BUT I'D THINK A CHIEFTAIN WOULD KNOW BETTER.

DING

IT WOULD BE, YES...

I'LL ARRANGE FOR IT RIGHT AWAY!

SPIN

YOU CAN MAKE UP YOUR MIND AFTER YOU MEET HIM!

OF COURSE! IN THAT CASE, WE SHOULD BRING THE BOY HERE!

THE SLUMS ARE HARDLY AN IDEAL ENVIRONMENT FOR HIM ANYWAY, AFTER ALL.

HOLD ON, YOUR HIGH-NESS.

YOU CAN'T POSSIBLY BE DONE HERE, CAN YOU?

COME ON, NOW!

...HM?

WEREN'T YOU GOING TO PUT AN END TO THE CONFLICT OVER THE FOREST?

EEEK!

JUST TRY AND RUN AWAY. I DARE YOU.

CONVENIENTLY, LIORA IS HERE TO REPRESENT THE OUTLAND COUNT OF RUDOLVON!

SPIN

Y-YES, OF COURSE!

I'M SURE WE'RE ALL EXCITED TO HEAR WHAT SHE HAS TO SAY!

MIA TEETERS ON THE BRINK OF A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN!

DROOOP

MERCIFUL MOONS, AM I EXHAUSTED...

All right!

SEEMS EVERYONE'S SAID THEIR PIECE, SO WE SHOULD HEAD ON BACK NOW.

YOUR HIGHNESS.

I APOLOGIZE FOR BEFORE.

!

OH? I'M SURPRISED— YOU MADE IT SOUND LIKE YOU COULDN'T TRUST ME.

IN FRONT OF TRIBESMEN... I MUST SAY THOSE THINGS.

BOW

YOU COME TO ENEMY LANDS...WITH ONLY ONE OTHER.

YOU ARE PERSON OF COURAGE... NOT LIAR.

THANK YOU FOR CARE OF MY GRANDSON.

I APOL-OGIZE FOR RUDE WORDS EARLIER.

WE LULUS VALUE OUR PRIDE HIGHLY.

THOSE WHO AFFRONT US ARE MET IN KIND, NO MATTER WHO THEY ARE...EVEN THE PRINCESS OF A MIGHTY EMPIRE.

BUT WE OWE THIS PRINCESS MIA A DEBT.

SHE HAS THE POWER TO CRUSH US, BUT INSTEAD CHOSE TO SHOW US RESPECT. WE MUST SHOW HER OUR RESPECT IN TURN.

...?

TO DO OTHERWISE WOULD BE AN AFFRONT TO HER PRIDE...

THERE'S NO NEED FOR THAT.

I WAS AWARE YOUR PEOPLE TREASURE THESE TREES, AND IT WAS RUDE OF ME TO KICK ONE.

MORE IMPOR-TANTLY...

IN OTHER WORDS, WE'RE EVEN!

I TRUST YOU'LL FIND THAT SATIS-FACTORY?

...I HAVE A REQUEST.

WHEN YOUR GRANDSON ARRIVES, PLEASE WELCOME HIM WITH OPEN ARMS.

AH さて

...!

LONG AGO...

...BOUND BY THE CHAINS OF MY PRIDE AS THE CHIEFTAIN, I FOUND MYSELF AT ODDS WITH MY DAUGHTER.

IN THE END, I DAMAGED OUR RELATIONSHIP BEYOND REPAIR.

SHE'S TELLING ME NOT TO MAKE THE SAME MISTAKE WITH MY GRANDSON.

THE PRINCESS IS SENDING ME A MESSAGE.

IT'S IN THE SLUMS! THERE'S NO TELLING WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN TO HIM THERE.

AND IF SOMETHING **DID** HAPPEN, LULUS ALL OVER THE EMPIRE WOULD PROBABLY RISE UP IN REVOLT!

IN THE WORST CASE, IT COULD LEAD STRAIGHT TO THE REVOLUTION!

IF THAT BOY IS THE GRANDSON OF THE LULUS' CHIEFTAIN, THEN LEAVING HIM IN THAT ORPHANAGE COULD CAUSE SERIOUS PROBLEMS!

SHE WAS NOT.

AS ALWAYS, MIA'S FIRST PRIORITY WAS HERSELF.

AND I'LL NEED THE CHIEFTAIN TO TREAT HIM NICELY SO HE DOESN'T DECIDE THAT HE WANTS TO GO BACK TO THE ORPHANAGE!

THE BEST SOLUTION IS TO SEND HIM STRAIGHT BACK TO THE FOREST.

YOUR HIGHNESS...

I AM GRATEFUL FOR... YOUR KIND WORDS...

SMILE

MIA'S WORDS CAME FROM A PLACE OF PURE AND CALCULATING SELF-INTEREST...

...A FACT WHICH NOBODY AT THE SCENE TOOK ANY NOTICE OF WHATSOEVER.

THE SEEDLINGS OF DANGER MUST BE STOMPED OUT BEFORE THEY CAN SPROUT!

Tearmoon Empire

BEFORE MIA AND DION LEFT

MILADY!

!

I'VE HEARD ALL SORTS OF THINGS ABOUT HOW DANGEROUS THAT FOREST IS RIGHT NOW.

YES, ANNE?

PLEASE ALLOW ME TO SEE YOU OFF ON YOUR EXCURSION.

WHAT IF SOMETHING HAPPENS, MILADY?

I'M JUST SO WORRIED...

SNIFF

Side Story

I'LL BE RIGHT BACK AFTERWARD!

I'M JUST GOING TO FIND MY HAIRPIN, THAT'S ALL.

MILADY...

THERE'S NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT.

I'LL BE PERFECTLY FINE, ANNE.

HEH...

I JUST HOPE I FIND IT RIGHT AWAY...

All right!

I'LL WAIT FOR YOU, MILADY! I WON'T GIVE UP HOPE!

...

MEANWHILE, AS MIA PRAYS HER HAIRPIN IS UNDAMAGED...

SHE'D BE BESIDE HERSELF IF SHE KNEW HER PRINCESS WAS OFF TO MEET THE ENEMY WITH ONLY A SINGLE GUARD.

...TWO MEN SHARE A DEEP MISUNDER-STANDING.

HEH...

KEEPING THE DETAILS UNDER WRAPS SO AS TO NOT WORRY HER MAID IN WAITING?

HOW VERY LIKE HER HIGH-NESS.

IT IS NOT. MIA JUST HAS NO PLAN TO SHARE.

SHE DIDN'T SAY A PEEP TO ME, BUT I GUESS THAT'S JUST HOW SHE DOES THINGS.

SURE DID. I'M STARTING TO GET A HANDLE ON HOW HER HIGHNESS GOES ABOUT HER BUSI-NESS.

SO YOU CAUGHT ON TOO, CAPTAIN DION?

I'M CERTAIN SHE'LL LEAD US IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION.

IF THIS IS THE PATH SHE'S CHOSEN, THEN THERE'S NO DOUBT IT'S FOR THE BEST.

SHE SURE DOES HAVE A WAY OF EARNING PEOPLE'S TRUST.

AND SO, ANOTHER POOR SOUL'S OPINION OF MIA WAS RAISED FOR NO GOOD REASON.

HEH...

MAYBE I REALLY CAN EXPECT HER TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT ALL THIS...? IF ONLY.

MIA, OF COURSE, DIDN'T NOTICE IN THE SLIGHTEST.

I JUST WANT TO FIND MY HAIRPIN IN NO TIME, SAY GOODBYE TO CAPTAIN DION...

...THEN DIVE INTO BED AND SLEEP LIKE NO TOMORROW!

Short Story

The Meaning of a Blade

The Meaning of a Blade

The battle of the Sealence Forest was as ghastly and brutal of an affair as the Tearmoon Empire had ever seen. As far as Dion Alaia and his hundred men were concerned, they might as well have been battling the Lulu tribesmen in the pits of hell itself. Arrows flew from all directions, loosed by small groups of enemies, each of whom knew how to take full advantage of the forest's terrain. Dion's soldiers fell one after another, picked off left and right.

Even within that hellscape, however, one man still clung to his title as the Empire's Finest. That man—Dion himself—heaved a sigh as he looked down at the fallen form of the last of the five warriors who had attempted to surround him.

"We never should've tried to fight on the enemy's home turf. Bloody hell..." Dion muttered to himself.

For all his strengths, Dion had one fatal weakness: There was only one of him. He was capable of turning just about any battle around, no matter how large of a disadvantage he found himself at...but that was only if he could *reach* the battle. In an extended engagement against an enemy that had spread out their forces, he simply wasn't capable of dashing from one side of the battle to the next quickly enough to make the sort of difference necessary. As a result, even while the battle swung in his favor in the area around him, the *rest* of his forces found themselves at the mercy of capable foes who knew the forest like the backs of their hands.

"Of course, I'm sure our enemies have their own complaints about how this has turned out. We were just pushing our luck by fighting in this forest... Hm?"

Suddenly, Dion noticed something. The man in front of him was, barely, still alive. He'd fallen to the ground, but his eyes were still just open enough to direct a sharp glare in Dion's direction.

"Leader...of the Empire's warriors," the Lulu man rasped in a thick accent. "Why do...you fight?"

A trickle of blood trailed from the corner of the Lulu man's mouth. His expression was a twisted grimace of agony, but it still carried a hint of expectation as he awaited Dion's answer. Why *did* he fight? Why *had* he invaded the Lulus' woodland?

"Well, that...is certainly the question, isn't it? I just wish I had an answer," Dion said flatly with a shrug. "I hate to say it, but we're not exactly fighting for a righteous cause here. Our orders were to march into the forest and bring it under our control, and that's all there is to say about it."

"So we were defeated...by man...who fights for nothing," the Lulu man said, his voice filled with anguish and regret.

Those would be his last words, as a moment later, Dion brought down his blade and put the man out of his misery. Sparing him would've done nothing more than drag out his suffering, so Dion chose to end it then and there. For a soldier like him, that was the one way he could show a certain form of respect for his foes.

"Can't say I regret all this...but I feel pretty guilty about it, I'll admit that much. Killing warriors like you and your men for no bloody reason doesn't exactly feel great," Dion muttered as he flicked the blood off his blade. "Who *are* we fighting for? What does anyone gain from this...?"

Dion's tone was as bitter as could be. He knew perfectly well that there was no room for excuses or platitudes in war. Nobody truly fought for a purely just cause. To fight was to take lives—to do your damndest to kill your opponent before they killed you first. Good and evil weren't factors in the heat of battle. The strong survived, and the weak died, simple as that...or at least, it should have been.

Dion dashed through the forest, sword in hand. "Anyone alive out there?!" he shouted, though he knew very well how little hope there was of receiving a response. His men had been elites—the cream of the crop—but the enemy's archers had been just as skilled. Dion had a feeling that the only member of his unit who stood even the slightest chance of still being alive was the one man who could nearly measure up to Dion himself: his giant of a vice-captain.

As it turned out, vice-captain Vanos was, indeed, still alive at the time. Dion found him seated on the ground near the outskirts of the forest, leaning against a rather large tree. As Dion walked over and looked down at him, Vanos seemed to hear his footsteps. His eyes flickered open, and he smiled up at Dion.

"Ah, Captain," said Vanos. "Nice to see you made it out in one piece..."

"Wish I could say the same for you," Dion somewhat flippantly replied.

Vanos let out an embarrassed chuckle. "Yeah, I sure did slip up, gotta say—" he began, only to be interrupted by a coughing fit that sent a bloody mist spraying from his mouth.

Dion glanced to Vanos's side, where another soldier—a newcomer to their unit—lay dead on the ground. "Did you carry him all the way out here?" he asked.

"Ga ha ha... I had a feeling a battle like this...would be too much for a greenhorn," said Vanos. "He didn't even know what it means to swing a blade, after all..."

War was war—nothing more and nothing less. It was a matter of kill or be killed, and there weren't all that many people out there who had made peace with that idea as thoroughly as Dion had. He was under no illusion that he fought for what was right, and he believed that those who claimed to smite down evil were full of themselves, at best. Nevertheless, whether for the sake of a so-called just cause or in a simple drunken brawl, it was inevitable that men like him would be thrust into do-or-die circumstances...and when those men were rank-and-file rookies who'd never taken a single life before, it often ended poorly for them.

"Couldn't help but think it'd be a tragedy for him to die in a pointless battle like this. Goes to show I'm still plenty green myself, eh?" said Vanos. His massive back was peppered with arrows. Not just one or two—there were well over ten wooden shafts protruding from him. It wasn't the sort of injury that a person could walk away from, and both of them knew it.

Vanos let out a deep, deep sigh as he gazed off into the distance. "So...how many of us...made it out?"

"Hate to say it, but just the two of us," Dion replied. "Can't say we didn't call it, I guess."

An amused smile spread across Vanos's face. "Nothing in life... ever works out...the way you hope it will, right?"

"Couldn't have said it better myself," Dion said quietly as he drew his sword. He knew there was no point in dragging out Vanos's suffering any longer. "As for my men, well, they're in your hands now. I expect all one hundred of them to be elites among elites by

the time I catch up with you all...though I hate to say that I think it's gonna be a while before I can make that happen."

"You want a hundred-man squad...waiting to greet you in hell? Gra ha ha... Sorry, but...I'll pass on that job."

Dion cocked his head. He hadn't been expecting that response.

"Keep this between you and me," Vanos said with a frown. "The truth is...I never...had a taste...for killing..."

Those were the vice-captain's last words. Vanos the gentle giant had passed on. He died a hero, having fought to his last breath to carry a wounded recruit out from the forest...but no one would ever tell the tale of his heroism. After all, he had also died in an inglorious battle fought for a pointless cause.

There was no meaning to be found in battle—no meaning to be found at the edge of a blade. And yet, in that moment...for the first time in his life...Dion found himself desiring meaning. He wanted a reason to wield his sword. He wanted to know just what the hell all the battles he'd fought had ever been meant to achieve.

And so...Dion bade the imperial army farewell and threw himself, body and soul, into the revolution.

A minor incident occurred some time after Dion joined forces with the revolutionary army. The setting was a corner of the revolutionary army's encampment, shortly after a strategy meeting came to a close. The moment Dion stepped out of the tent, a chill ran down his spine. He knew in an instant that someone intended to take his life, and drew his sword without hesitation. A moment later, a voice rang out.

"You die now, Dion Alaia!"

"Not the subtlest assassin, are you?" Dion chuckled to himself as he took in the situation—and, in particular, the three arrows

flying toward him. “Skilled, though. It takes one hell of a shot to loose three arrows at once and hit your mark with all of them!”

Of course, even as he admired his assailant, Dion proved himself just as skilled by cutting all three arrows out of the air with a single stroke of his blade.

“What do we have here? An imperial infiltrator...? Or maybe not,” Dion muttered casually, only to frown a moment later as his gaze fell upon the face of the bow-bearing girl who had shot at him. He recognized her distinctive features—her light-brown skin and silvery hair brought him right back to that fateful battle in the woods. “A survivor of the Lulu Tribe?”

“Dion Alaia. I will avenge my people... I will avenge my brother!”

Hatred burned bright in the eyes of the Lulu girl as she glared at Dion. Her name was Liora Lulu, and she was one of the few survivors of her tribe who remained scattered across the empire. As she nocked a new arrow, however, a second girl dashed onto the scene to stop her.

“Liora, *no*! That’s enough!” the second girl shouted, then tuned toward Dion and bowed deeply. “I beg of you to forgive my attendant's indiscretion, Sir Dion Alaia!”

“And you are...?” asked Dion.

“I am Tiona Rudolvon,” the girl replied.

“Oh. Outcount Rudolvon’s daughter, eh? The revolution’s very own saint?” said Dion, a hint of humor creeping into his tone.

Tiona, however, shook her head with an air of absolute sincerity. “That’s Miss Rafina. Such a title doesn’t suit me.”

“And yet strangely, you never seem to object when the men sing your praises,” said Dion with a rather pointed grin.

Tiona smiled right back at him. "It's important for them to have someone they can look up to, and I'll be more than happy to play that role, if that's what it takes to take revenge upon the imperial family," she said.

Tiona's resolve was clear for Dion to see, and he gave her a nod. "I get it now. My apologies then, Miss Rudolvon. My blade is yours... for the time being, anyway."

After the battle of the Sealance Forest, Dion pledged to wield his blade for the sake of vengeance. It wasn't all that long at all before he began to make good on that pledge. The revolutionary army claimed victory after victory, and Dion carried out his revenge by way of his blade. From the officers who had ordered him to march into all but certain death to the egotistical nobles who had demanded the impossible, he cut down all who would oppose him...and when it was all over, that was that. Nothing had changed for him, from the beginning of the war to the end.

Victory was all Dion's sword could gain him—well, victory, and perhaps the ever so slight sense of satisfaction brought by the deaths of a few of his particularly hated foes. That being said, the hollow nature of his success never got to him. After all, he'd known all along that his quest would be a fruitless one.

"A blade holds no meaning, and trying to find meaning by wielding one is an effort doomed from the start."

Men swung their swords without purpose, and those who proved strong enough earned the right to live. That arrangement suited Dion just fine. Life was easier that way.

"No point trying to find meaning in battle. This time was just a bit of an exception, that's all," Dion muttered as he poured out a glass by the graves of his men, then silently stood up. It was time for him

to move on. Off to his next battle, where he'd swing his blade for no good reason, never seeking or expecting a purpose to present itself...

History would dub Dion Alaia the revolutionary army's mightiest swordsman. That being said, no records would be passed down regarding what happened to him after his forces won the day. No one could say for sure how he lived, or how he eventually met his end.

And so time marched on...

"Bloody hell... It's nice that we dodged all-out warfare and all, but putting all these tents up just to knock 'em down again sure feels like a lot of wasted effort." Dion sighed. A few days had passed since Mia had ordered him and his troops to fall back to the Viscount's estate, and they were now hard at work dismantling the camp they'd set up by the Sealance Forest. "Personally, I wouldn't mind just leaving it all for the Lulu Tribe to claim. Call it a present, or an apology for all the trouble we put them through."

"Gra ha ha, now there's an idea! Hauling it all back with us is gonna be another big old hassle, after all," said Vanos, Dion's vice-captain, as he glanced at a cart piled high with folded tents and shook his head with exasperation. "Anyway, this may have all been a wasted effort, but at least we didn't waste any lives before it was done with! That's something to celebrate, if you ask me."

"Even if we only managed it by the skin of our teeth. That princess's mind works in mysterious ways, I swear... Hm?"

Dion paused to glance over at the forest. A moment later, several figures—warriors of the Lulu tribe—appeared from between the trees.

"Need something?" Dion called out with a friendly smile. "Just to avoid any unpleasant misunderstandings, we're not here to fight! We're just packing up our tents, and we'll be on our way once we've finished. Not that we had any interest in fighting you to begin with, of course..."

"We understand. Only here...to share drink and celebrate," said a warrior with a particularly large build. He turned to look behind him, where Dion soon made out a pair of tribesmen carrying a cask, presumably full of some sort of booze.

"You're here to 'share drink'...? This all turned out for the best in the end, sure, but still—you wanna celebrate with men who you were one wrong move away from trying to kill just a few days ago?" asked Vanos with a puzzled frown.

"In the end...we not fight. No lives...lost," said the man who seemed to be the warriors' leader. "If that is not reason to celebrate... then what is?"

"I get it now. Can't argue with that!" Vanos said with a grin before ushering the Lulus into the partially deconstructed camp.

A hearty, alcohol-fueled party quickly ensued. Both sides were somewhat reserved at first, wary at the thought of sharing drinks with yesterday's foe, but their reservations went the way of their inhibitions as the booze continued to flow. It wasn't long before all involved parties came to realize that as fellow career warriors, they had quite a lot in common.

"Leader of the empire's warriors," the Lulu leader said, striking up an abrupt conversation.

Dion felt a sudden and intense sense of déjà vu. An image flashed through his mind. He couldn't place when it was from, but somehow, he could clearly visualize himself holding the very man who was now speaking to him at bladepoint, and then...

"Hm? What wrong?"

"Oh...it's nothing," said Dion. "It just struck me that I had yet to introduce myself. I'm Dion—Dion Alaia."

"My name Laero. Laero Lulu," said the Lulu warrior. A moment later, Laero gave Dion a sharp, piercing look, and spoke once more. "So, Dion...why you fight?"

Once again, Dion was overtaken by déjà vu. "Well, that...is certainly the question, isn't it?" he said, unable to shake the feeling that it was also a question he'd been asked before.

This time, however...it wasn't as painful of a question to consider as he felt it had been before. Moreover, though he couldn't quite explain why, an answer seemed to rise up unbidden from within him. Dion glanced into the sky to find the moon drifting along high and large above him, and for some reason, the face of a certain princess floated through his mind's eye.

"If we're gonna fight for any cause, I'd say that princess's is a good enough pick. If we can trust our blades with anyone, it's her," said Vanos. It was almost as if he'd read Dion's mind.

"I hear tales...from my sister," said Laero. "She say your princess...is person worthy of trust."

It seemed that Laero had a sister who happened to be acquainted with Mia. His and Vanos's enthusiastic endorsement, however, put a slight frown on Dion's face.

"Swing my sword for the princess's sake, huh? I guess I could think of worse fates," Dion muttered in an unusually quiet and indirect tone.

Vanos cocked his head. "Oh? Something wrong?"

"Nah," said Dion. "I was just thinking about how much of a nightmare trying to become a general would be, that's all."

Vanos and the rest of Dion's soldiers who happened to be in earshot cracked up. Apparently they thought that Dion had been joking, and he didn't offer any more than a shrug to clarify.

"If I keep following the princess's orders, then I really might end up becoming a general in the end. Though, then again...maybe I should just count myself lucky to have found someone worth entrusting my blade to," Dion quietly muttered to himself, then drained his glass in a single swig.

♦ Afterword ♦

Hello! This is the author of the original novels, Nozomu Mochitsuki. Congratulations on the publication of the manga's sixth volume!

This volume is full of action scenes, a rarity in *Tearmoon Empire*...or so I say, but I seem to recall myself writing something very similar in the afterword for volume 4. Is this series...more action-packed than I give it credit for?

In any case, the way the action scenes in the forest this volume were drawn made them look astonishingly cool. Thank you very much, Morino! Mia's ever-varied expressions were as fun as ever, as well.

I hope that everyone who decided to give this volume a try enjoys it, and I hope to see you again in volume 7!

Nozomu Mochitsuki

Here we are in the sixth volume!
Thank you very much for continuing
to read this series.

This volume features the first appearance of Mia's archenemy, Dion! I really enjoyed having so many chances to draw Mia getting scared out of her skin, lol.

This volume also featured the first cover appearance of Li'l Guill! The truth is, when I turned in the rough draft for the cover art, the author of the original novels, Mochitsuki, commented that it would be funny if we made a variation where the guillotine had arms and legs. In the end, we used that version as the volume's first color page. I wonder how many of you noticed? lol

Also, a spinoff manga starring the various maids and aides of Tearmoon Empire has recently begun serialization! It seems it's going to feature the sort of day-to-day life scenes that you don't see all that many of in the main series, so I'm looking forward to it as much as anyone. I hope you'll continue to support the novels as well as the manga adaptations!

That's all for now!
See you in volume 7!

~Mizu Morino

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by Nozomu Mochitsuki (story) and Mizu Morino (artwork)
Original character designs by Gilse

Translated by Tristan K. Hill
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